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Senate

THE PUBLIC EDUCATION REINVESTMENT, REINVENTION AND RESPONSIBILITY ACT

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, I am very pleased to rise today in support of the Public Education Reinvestment, Reinvention, and Responsibility Act. I want to congratulate my good friends, the Senator from Connecticut and the Senator from Indiana, for their strong leadership on this issue. When they first introduced this legislation back last year, the prospects for bipartisan education reform looked far different than they do today. Members on the two sides of the aisle were sharply divided over the future of the Federal role in education. As a result, the Congress failed last year to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for the first time in its 35-year history.

Last year, it took courage and foresight for the supporters of this legislation to step into the partisan breach in the way that they did. This bill received all of 13 votes when it was first brought to the floor. Today, we ought to all be grateful for the leadership of those 13 senators, because this year the Public Education Reinvestment, Reinvention, and Responsibility Act represents the best hope and the best blueprint for finally achieving meaningful, bipartisan reform of the Federal role in education.

For the last eight years, I had the great privilege of serving my little State as governor. During that time, I worked together with legislators from both sides

of the aisle, with educators and others, to set rigorous standards, to provide local schools with the resources and flexibility they needed, and in return to demand accountability for results. We in Delaware have not been alone in this endeavor. We have been part of a nationwide movement for change—a movement of parents and teachers, of employers, legislators and governors, who believe that our public schools can be improved and that every child can learn.

As a former chairman of the National Governors' Association, I can attest that the Federal Government is frequently a lagging indicator when it comes to responsiveness to change. It is clearly states and local communities that are leading the movement for change in public education today. The bill we introduce today does not seek to make the Federal Government the leader in education reform by micromanaging the operation of local schools. Nor does this legislation seek to perpetuate the status quo in which the Federal Government passively funds and facilitates failure. Rather, this legislation seeks for the first time to make the Federal Government a partner and catalyst in the movement for reform that we see all across this country at the State and local level. This legislation refocuses Federal policy on doing a few things, but doing them well. It redirects Federal policy toward the

purpose of achieving results rather than promulgating yet more rules and regulations.

I believe we have a tremendous opportunity this year to achieve bipartisan consensus to reform and reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and in so doing to redeem the original intent of that landmark legislation. I want to express my appreciation to our new President for his interest in renewing educational opportunity in America and leaving no child behind. There is much in the legislation we introduce today that squares with the plan that the President sent to Congress last week. We on this side of the aisle agree with the President that we need to invest more Federal dollars in our schools, particularly in schools that serve the neediest students. We also agree that the dollars we provide, we should provide more flexibly. And we agree that if we are going to provide more money, and if we are going to provide that money more flexibly, we should demand results. That's the formula: invest in reform; insist on results.

I believe we also agree with our new President that parents should be empowered to make choices to send their children to a variety of different schools. We agree that parents are the first enforcers of accountability in public education. Where we disagree is in how we provide that choice. The President believes that the best way to empower parents and to provide them with choices is to give children and their parents vouchers of \$1,500. With all due respect, that is an empty promise. In my State, you just can't get your child into most private or parochial schools for \$1,500 per year. That is simply an empty promise.

I believe there is a better way. I believe we've found a better way in my little state of Delaware. Four years ago, we introduced statewide public school choice. We also passed our first charter schools law. I knew that this was going to work when I heard the following conversation between a school administrator and some of his colleagues. He said, "If we don't provide parents and families what they want and need, they'll send their kids somewhere else." I thought to myself, "Right! He's got it."

We have 200 public schools in my small State, and students in all of these schools take our test measuring what they know and can do in reading, writing, and math. We also measure our schools by the incidence of poverty, from highest to lowest. The school with the highest incidence of poverty in my state is the East Side Charter School in Wilmington, Delaware. The incidence of poverty there is 83 percent. Its students are almost all minority. It is right in the center of the projects in Wilmington. In the first year after East Side Charter School opened its doors, very few of its students met our state standards in math. Last spring, every third grader there who took our math test met or exceeded our standards, which is something that happened at no other school in the state. It's a remarkable story. And it's been possible because East Side Charter School is a remarkable school. Kids can come early and stay late. They have a longer school year. They wear school uniforms. Parents have to sign a contract of mutual responsibility. Teachers are given greater authority to innovate and initiate.

We need to ensure that parents and students are getting what they want and

need, and if they're not getting what they want and need that they have the choice--and most importantly that they have the ability--to go somewhere else. A \$1,500 voucher, doesn't give parents that ability, at least not in my State. Public school choice and charter schools do.

We agree on many things. Where we disagree, as on vouchers, I believe we can find common ground. I believe that

we can come together, for example, to provide a ``safety valve" to children in failing schools, in the way of broader public school choice and greater access to charter schools. I am therefore hopeful, about the prospects for bipartisan agreement and for meaningful reform. To that end, I urge my colleagues to support the Public Education Reinvestment, Reinvention, and Responsibility Act.